

Glory and immortality:

the motif of *monumentum aere perennius* by Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā'

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*If one is truly to succeed in leading a person to a specific place,
one must first and foremost take care to find him where he is
and begin there... But all true helping begins with a humbling.*

Søren Kierkegaard

Early Arabic poetry is commonly considered profane. One could argue that, as in many other cultures, in its origins Arabic poetry was closely related to magical practices, one could point to the function of poetry in the cult of mourning or refer to numerous attestations of oaths in poetry and to texts containing Biblical motifs and references to Jews and Christians. Nonetheless, against the background of several other Near Eastern literatures, formed to a great extent by rich traditions of liturgical poetry, the transmitted works of early Arabic poetry do indeed appear free from any religious connotations, something which has been interpreted as indicating “that the Arab of Central Arabia, in the days before al-Islām, interested himself little in religion of any sort”.¹ The *jahiliyyah* concept, that draws a clear line of demarcation between pre-Islamic and Islamic cultural history, seems to find its confirmation here and in return, allows one to exclude the early Arabic literary tradition from the context of Arab religious history. The texts of early Arabic poetry remain, however, the major literary source on pre-Islamic Arabia. If one does not subscribe to the *jahiliyyah* model unconditionally, but attempts to investigate the transition from the pre-Islamic to Islamic period in its historical continuity, one has to pay close attention to early Arabic poetry.² In other words, if one is to understand how Arabs reached the stage of their cultural history at which Islam emerged, one should start from where they did, and look at their profane pre-Islamic heritage. Arabic literary works of this time offer neither the epic pathos of Gilgamesh nor the prayerful warmth of the psalmist. One has, therefore, to be humble in approaching the sources, which do not contain anything religious, at least not at first glance. That is to say that religious themes do not only find their expression in specific liturgical genres, but can also be reflected in other forms of literary production. From this point of view, texts of early Arabic poetry, as profane as they are, provide evidence of important aspects of the social and cultural consciousness of Arabs in Late Antiquity, which are relevant also in the context of religious history. One of them is the notion of immortality.

¹ Lyall Ch.J., *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry, Chiefly Prae-Islamic with an Introduction and Notes*. London 1885, xxvii.

² On the importance of Arabic poetry for the study of the Qur'ān see Bauer T., “The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur'ānic Studies Including Observations on *Kull* and on Q 22:27, 26:225, and 52:31,” in: *The Qur'ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*. Ed. by Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx. Leiden 2010, 699.

It has been commonly assumed that Arabs in pre-Islamic time did not develop a notion of hereafter and did not elaborate on the idea of immortality. This assumption seems to find its confirmation in the well known qur'ānic verse 45:24:

وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَا إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ

They say, 'There is nothing but our present life; we die, and we live, and nothing but Time destroys us.' (trans. A.J. Arberry)³

Some poetic texts also suggest that prior to Islam Arabs did not acknowledge the reality of the hereafter. Labīd, a famous early Arab poet, describes the fleetingness of human life in the opening line of his *Rithā' Abrad*:

بَلَيْنَا وَمَا تَبْلَى النُّجُومُ الطَّوَالُغُ وَتَبْقَى الْجِبَالُ بَعْدَنَا وَالْمَصَانِعُ

We [mortals] wither and perish, but the stars that rise on high do not, and the hills and the water-towers remain after we have gone. (trans. A. Jones)⁴

Yet, in theoretical literary discourse it has been recognised that the power to glorify is inseparably linked with the power to immortalise, and that poetic preoccupation with this power is immanent in poetry. In Classical philology, for example, all Greek literature – song, poetry, prose – is commonly regarded as originating in κλέος, the act of praising famous deeds.⁵ It is remarkable that in the Christian tradition the Antique notion of glory obtains a significant religious dimension and becomes a central attribute of immortality - Rom 2:7:

τοῖς μὲν καθ' ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν, ζωὴν αἰώνιον - *To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he will give eternal life.* (New International Version)

Glory is here a synonym for salvation, as also in Rom 8:17-18:

εἰ δὲ τέκνα, καὶ κληρονόμοι: κληρονόμοι μὲν θεοῦ, συγκληρονόμοι δὲ Χριστοῦ, εἴπερ συμπάσχομεν ἵνα καὶ συνδοξασθῶμεν. Λογίζομαι γὰρ ὅτι οὐκ ἄξια τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ πρὸς τὴν μέλλουσας δόξαν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι εἰς ἡμᾶς. - *And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* (New International Version)

In the cultural tradition of Late Antiquity glory and immortality are closely linked together. Early Arabic poetry makes a similar connection. Praising is prevalent in Arabic poetry, and in the tribal Arab society of pre-Islamic times poetry itself was a powerful tool to glorify and to achieve immortality in the memory of future generations. It is not surprising that such

³ Arberry A.J., *The Koran Interpreted*. Vol. 2. London 1955, 212.

⁴ Jones A., *Early Arabic Poetry. Select Poems*. Oxford 2011, 96.

⁵ Nagy G., *Early Greek views of poets and poetry*; in: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Ed. by George A. Kennedy. Cambridge 1989, 9.

immortality in the social environment of early Arab tribal society, that was so strongly constituted by the collective consciousness, was primarily a collective rather than an individual matter. Human life was perceived within a chain of generations, constantly reproducing themselves in the endless circle of time. Nevertheless, poetic sources provide evidence that Arabs in the pre-Islamic period, especially in the decades immediately preceding the rise of Islam, were increasingly concerned with the afterlife and immortality as being relevant to the individual. A poem attributed to as-Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā' provides an interesting variation on this topic.

As-Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā'⁶ was born around 560 AD to Jewish parents and lived in the region Taymā', where a Jewish presence was attested since at least the second century AD.⁷ In or near to this oasis was located al-Ablaq⁸, the castle of as-Samaw'al's family, a place connected to the only known episode from as-Samaw'al's life, which also made his name proverbial: as-Samaw'al became famous in the Arabic tradition as someone who was uncompromisingly faithful and loyal. As he was entrusted with the armour of his protégé, as-Samaw'al refused to hand it over to his enemies in exchange for the life of his own son, who was executed as a result. A reference to these events contains verse 12 of the poem number VI in as-Samaw'al's *diwan*, where the owner of the armour is described as 'the Kindī'. This attribution and the identification of as-Samaw'al's protégé with Imru' al-Qays, the grandson of the last king of Kinda, in *Kitāb al-aghānī*⁹ have been regarded by Werner Caskel as later inventions.¹⁰ Judging the entire poem for that reason as a forgery by Muslim-Arab genealogists or composers of the *Imru' al-Qays Romance* might, however, go too far. The reference to 'the Kindī' has no significant weight within the text of the poem as a whole. It could well have been added to it in Islamic time, but does not undermine the general pre-Islamic character of the poem, which deserves a closer analysis also apart from its biographical implications.

⁶ Rather scant details about as-Samaw'al's life are reported in *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 4, 332-333, 9, 96-99, 22, 116-121. For an overview of the research on as-Samaw'al's poetry and further bibliography see: Bauer T., "Al-Samaw'al b. 'Ādiyā'", in: *El*, vol. 8. Leiden 1995, 1041-1042, and Sezgin F., *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*. Vol. 2. Leiden 1967, 249-250. On Jews in Arabia see: Newby G.D., *A History of the Jews of Arabia from Ancient Times to their Eclipse under Islam*. Columbia 1988, and more recent articles by Hoyland R., "The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qur'ān and in their inscriptions," in: *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in its Historical Context 2*, ed. by G.S. Reynolds. London 2011, 91-116; Hoyland R., "The Jewish Poets of Muḥammad's Hijāz," in: *Judaïsme en Arabie*, ed. by Christian Robin (forthcoming).

⁷ For an overview of ongoing archaeological research on Taymā' see: Hausleiter A., "Das antike Tayma': eine Oase im Kontaktbereich der Kulturen. Neue Forschungen an einem Zentralort der Karawanenstraße," in: *Roads of Arabia. Archäologische Schätze aus Saudi Arabien*, Berlin 2011, 102-123.

⁸ Werner Caskel notes that the meaning of the name 'al-Ablaq' is 'the spotty one' referring to the red and grey stone of the castle, see: Caskel W., *Liḥyan und Liḥyanisch*. Cologne 1953, nr. 27 and Caskel W., "Al-A'sā Nr. 25,6," in: *Studi Orientalistici in Onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida*. Vol. 1. Rome 1956, 133.

⁹ *Kitāb al-aghānī* 9, 99.

¹⁰ Caskel W., "Al-A'sā Nr. 25,6," in: *Studi Orientalistici in Onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida*. Vol. 1. Rome 1956, 136.

The poem has 16 lines and is composed in the wāfir metre.¹¹ The two opening lines contain the so-called aṭlāl motif and the motif of women railing against the poet. Both motifs are conventional in the naṣīb, the opening part of a qaṣida. The following part of the poem is a faḥr, the poet's self-praise.

In lines 3 and 4 as-Samaw'al talks about the castle of al-Ablaq, constructed by his grandfather 'Ādiyā', and then refers to his grandfather's commandment to preserve what he has built (line 5). The castle of the ancestors is a visible manifestation of as-Samaw'al's inherited authority, which he has to defend. Authority constituted the structure of early Arab society and this authority was based on prestige. Prestige was related to fame and glory, and as such it necessarily implied the recognition of others, the acknowledgement of society. Deeds themselves were not important, but rather the glory they helped to achieve for those fulfilling them, as 'Antara b. Šaddād clearly says:

وَلَا مَالٌ إِلَّا مَا أَفَادَكَ نَيْلُهُ ثَنَاءٌ وَلَا مَالٌ لِمَنْ لَا لَهُ مَجْدٌ

*There is no treasure except for that, which brings you praise
and there is no treasure for someone, who has no glory.*¹²

Authority had not only to be achieved, but also secured over time. The logic of 'Ādiyā's demand is obvious. As-Samaw'al answers this challenge with complete confidence in the following passage, beginning at line 6:

وَبَيْتٌ قَدْ بَنَيْتُ بِغَيْرِ طِينٍ وَلَا خَشَبٍ وَمَجْدٌ قَدْ أَتَيْتُ

*A good many bayt have I built without clay
and without wood, and a good many honours have I won.*

A magnificent castle is metaphorically replaced by a structure that does not have even the basic construction materials such as clay and wood, yet allows the poet to claim that he has reached his main goal – glory.

Glory and fame manifest themselves through communication. Its major medium in early Arab society was poetry itself, and it is to the inseparable connection between poetry and glory that as-Samaw'al gave special emphasis. The first half of the quoted line contains the word *bayt* which carries three major meanings in Arabic: 'tent, house', 'house of worship, sanctuary', and 'line of poetry, verse'. The ingenious play on the semantics of the word *bayt* underlies the metaphorical sense of the verse. The "tents" of as-Samaw'al are his poetry. This interpretation is supported also by another variation of the verse:

وَبَيْتٌ لَيْسَ مِنْ وَبَرٍ وَطِينٍ عَلَى ظَهْرِ الْمَطِيَّةِ قَدْ بَنَيْتُ

*A good many bayt neither out of hair nor of clay
have I built upon the back of a she-camel.*¹³

¹¹ For the full text of the poem and its translation refer to the appendix.

¹² *Sharḥ dīwān 'Antara*. Beirut, 126.

¹³ *Dīwān as-Samaw'al*, ed. by Wādih aṣ-Ṣamad. Beirut 1996, 97.

Explicitly excluding hair and clay, the common construction materials for tents and houses, the poet indicates that *bayt* refers to poetry and recalls the habit of reciting it during long rides in the desert.¹⁴

As-Samaw'al gives preference to poetry over a monumental building – a meaningful change, which introduces a new perspective on immortality.

Al-Ablaq is placed in opposition to the finiteness of human life on earth. The symbolic immortality of a castle is, however, deprived of any implication of the individuality of its creator. It is understood merely in the context of collective memory. Mentioning someone who built the castle does not change anything. The name of 'Ādiyā' stands not for his unique artistic talent as an architect, but for the impersonal glory and authority embodied in the castle. Both the monument and the name of the man who commissioned it to be built are indications of prestige and glory. It is clear that their 'immortality', like the foundation stones of the castle itself, is anchored to the earth and implies no eschatological dimension. It is therefore not surprising that for Labīd impressive monuments like water-towers become synonymous with stars and mountains, great and practically eternal, yet absolutely impersonal objects of the natural world. For 'Ādiyā' the preservation of his castle is of the utmost importance, because he regards it as a powerful means of bequeathing authority on his descendants. For Labīd the perspective of such collective immortality is no longer satisfactory and his reference to man-made towers, along with stars and mountains, only increases the dramatic tension of his reflection: monuments are not symbols of the eternity of human glory, but the opposite – the undeniable and highly visible proof of the shortness and futility of human life. If it is true also for as-Samaw'al, then what makes poetry different from a castle in preserving and communicating a poet's glory?

The opposition of poetry to built monuments is a well-known motif in Antique and Late Antique literatures. One of its earliest attestations is provided in an Egyptian source, the famous papyrus Chester Beatty IV¹⁵ dated as early as 1200 BC. The text of the papyrus contains praise for writers who acquired imperishable fame through their literary work:

iw nAy.sn wD HsAw m iwtn
is.sn smxm
dm.tw rn.sn Hr nAy.sn Sfdw
irw Dr wnn.sn nfrw
sxA.f irt st n Hnty r nHH

*Their tombstones are smeared with mud,
their tombs are forgotten,*

¹⁴ Compare also a line of an anonymous poet quoted by Lane:

وَبَيْتٌ عَلَى ظَهْرِ الْمَطْيِ بَنِيْتُ
بِأَسْمَرٍ مَشْفُوقِ الْخَيَاشِيمِ يَرْعَفُ

"Many a bayt upon the back of the camel have I constructed with a tawny thing slit in the nose and bleeding," i.e. with the reed-pen, Lane 1.1, 280-281.

¹⁵ British Museum ESA 10684.

*but their names are read out on their scrolls,
written when they were young.
Being remembered makes them, to the limits of eternity*
(trans. by Miriam Lichtheim)¹⁶

The Greek poets Pindar (522/518 – 445 BC) and Simonides (557/556 BC – 468/467 BC), and the Roman poet Ovid (b. 43 BC) also compare poetry with architectural monuments. The best known variation on the topic, which was later imitated in various European literatures, is the one by the Roman lyric poet Horace (65 – 8 BC). In his ode Carminum III, 30 Horace famously proclaims:

*Exegi monumentum aere perennius
Regalique situ pyramidum altius
I have completed a monument
more lasting than bronze and far higher
than that royal pile of Pyramids*
(trans. by Peter Saint-Andre).

The capability of poetry to outlast its author was also reflected by Arab poets as early as pre-Islamic times, and subsequently.¹⁷ As-Samaw'al, on the contrary, does not elaborate on this idea explicitly. Even if we assume that it is implied, the time scale for as-Samaw'al is not the main point of contrast between poetry and the castle. The immortality provided by poetry remains trapped in this world in the same way as the eternity claimed by a monument, even if words can be more lasting than stones. Being memorable makes poetry an excellent medium, but does not change its function in glorifying and preserving an authoritative name that is immortal only as a subject of collective memory. Other motifs in the *fahr* section of as-Samaw'al's text also follow the conventions of early Arabic poetry in depicting the poet as a hero personifying collective ideals. Line 9 touches upon the theme of the finiteness of human life:

VI:9
فَإِنْ أَهْلِكَ فَقَدْ أَبْلَيْتُ عُذْرًا وَقَضَيْتُ اللَّبَانَةَ وَأَشْتَقَيْتُ

*So if I perish, yet I have given a proof of forgiveness,
fulfilled the purpose and have been cured.*

One might be inclined to assume that behind the notion of forgiveness and the description of other moral characteristics of the poet, in contrast to his achievements as a leader in war (line 7) and a successful lover (lines 14-15), lies the idea of a personal reward in the hereafter,

¹⁶ Lichtheim M., *Ancient Egyptian literature: a book of readings*. Vol. 2. *The New Kingdom*. Berkeley/London 1976, 175f.

¹⁷ For examples refer to the article by Gelder G.J. van, "Persons as Texts/Texts as Persons in Classical Arabic Literature," in: *Conscious Voices. Concepts of Writing in the Middle East*. Ed. by Stephan Guth, Priska Furrer and Johann Christoph Bürgel. Beirut 1999, 237-253.

which should not have been unfamiliar to as-Samaw'al as a Jewish poet. Nevertheless, the words "if I perish" introduce the perspective of the future in negative terms and allow for immortality only in the form of memory. The quantitative aspect of duration in time is here of secondary importance, and this might be the reason why as-Samaw'al remains silent about poetry being more durable than monuments. Yet one can not overlook the strong opposition between the poetry and the castle in his *qaṣīda*. The contrast conveys the dialogic structure of the passage: as-Samaw'al puts poetry at the forefront as a direct response to his grandfather's commandment to preserve the castle. Moreover, the polarizing context is underlined by the description of poetry as being of a provocatively intangible material – "without clay and without wood". Poetry is not just another tool to achieve glory, it is a fundamentally different one. But if the communicative function of the castle and poetry is the same – perpetuating glory and authority – then their opposition by as-Samaw'al becomes meaningful only through the emphasis on poetry as an individual achievement, on poetry as manifestation of "the singularity of the creative initiative".¹⁸

Horace, as Sergej Averinzev observes, has already used the motif of *monumentum aere perennius* to express his individual literary achievement as "having been the first to adapt Aeolic songs into Italian measures".¹⁹ The distinguishing feature of the ode by Horace is its unambiguous statement about the poet as an author and, consequently, about the immortality of poetry as his individual achievement and not simply another edition of impersonal glory and collective authority made perpetual in a new format.

As-Samaw'al is less explicit. His reference to poetry, along with numerous other examples of "the abundance of the metaphorical equation of texts and persons"²⁰ in early and classical Arabic poetry, should not be over-interpreted in the context of the idea of individual authorship in its post-modern sense. Nonetheless, his emphasis on poetry as a contrast to the heritage of his predecessors, symbolically represented by the inherited castle, provides an expression of the deeper self-consciousness of an individual.

Such consciousness unfolds itself fully in the increasingly dramatic perception of death and a desire for personal immortality. It is remarkable that as-Samaw'al explicitly extends his claim for immortality beyond the symbolism of the castle. In the opening line of poem III he declares:

III:1
بِالْأَبْلَقِ الْفَرْدِ بَيْتِي بِهِ وَبَيْتُ الْمَصِيرِ سِوَى الْأَبْلَقِ

¹⁸ Averinzev S., "Avtorstvo i avtoritet," in: *Istoričeskaya poetika. Literaturnye epohi i tipy hudožestvennogo soznaniya*. Moscow 1994, 111.

¹⁹ Idem.

²⁰ Gelder G.J. van, "Persons as Texts/Texts as Persons in Classical Arabic Literature," in: *Conscious Voices. Concepts of Writing in the Middle East*. Ed. by Stephan Guth, Priska Furrer and Johann Christoph Bürgel. Beirut 1999, 252.

*In the unique al-Ablaq is my house [bayt],
but the house [bayt] of the final goal is other than al-Ablaq.*

The line suggests not only a notion of the hereafter, but more explicitly denies the absolute superiority of the allegedly eternal nature of the physical world as opposed to human destiny. Such an approach reflects the increasing consciousness of a human as an individual being, which can be observed in Arabic poetry shortly before the rise of Islam.²¹ An-Nābīga ad-Dubyānī (d. 605), a contemporary of as-Samaw'al, offers, in a short poem on the death of a certain Ḥisn²², another example of a strong poetic expression of man's rebellion against the impersonal powers of space and time:

يَقُولُونَ جِصْنٌ ثُمَّ تَأْبَى نَفْسُهُمْ وَكَيْفَ بِجِصْنٍ وَالْجِبَالُ جُمُوحُ
وَلَمْ تَلْفِظِ الْمَوْتَى الْقُبُورُ وَلَمْ تَزَلْ نُجُومُ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَدِيمُ صَحِيحُ

They say Ḥisn! – Then their souls refused to listen.

How could this befall Ḥisn, while the mountains are still visible?

*The earth has not vomited up its graves, still
are the stars in the heavens, and the surface of the earth is undamaged.*

The life of Ḥisn, a single individual, appears to be so valuable and unique that the poet claims just the same immortality for him as for the universe. The human individual is no longer subject to the outside world, but rather the outside world to the individual.

Poem VI by as-Samaw'al cannot be classified as a religious text. It is self-praise by the poet and, despite some specific motifs, it remains within the conventions of the early Arabic tradition of praise poetry. Nevertheless, the text provides evidence that ideas of immortality and the hereafter were not unknown to Arabs in pre-Islamic times; their notion of human life was not perceived as absolutely limited to physical existence, but also implied hopes of, and a strong desire to achieve, immortality. This immortality might be nothing more than the memory of descendants, with no religious connotation as such. However, as the example of as-Samaw'al's poem shows, people in Arabia in the second half of the 6th century approached the issue of death and immortality as an individual matter. The later qur'ānic revelation and its eschatology are strongly focused on the individual character of every human being and individual moral responsibility, as Q 23:99-101 says:

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ

²¹ Jacobi R., "Time and Reality in "Nasīb" and "Ghazal"", in: Journal of Arabic Literature 16 (1985), 1-17.

²² Ahlwardt W., *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets Ennābīga, 'Antara, Tharafa, Zuhair, 'Alqama and Imru'ulqais*. London 1870, 166. As Renate Jacobi has pointed out to me, Ḥisn is a rare personal name. Here it refers most probably to Ḥisn ibn Ḥuḍayfa, the chief of al-Fazāra, a sub-group of an-Nābīga's own tribe of Banū Dubyān. Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, another famous early Arab poet, dedicated a poem to Ḥisn ibn Ḥuḍayfa, see *Šarḥ Dīwān Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā*. Cairo 1944, 124-144. For the aḥbār on Ḥisn refer to *Mufaḍḍalīyāt* 1, 364-365.

لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ إِلَى يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ
فَإِذَا نُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ فَلَا أَنْسَابَ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَلَا يَتَسَاءَلُونَ

Till, when death comes to one of them, he says, 'My Lord, return me; haply I shall do righteousness in that I forsook.' Nay, it is but a word he speaks; and there, behind them, is a barrier until the day that they shall be raised up. For when the Trumpet is blown, that day there shall be no kinship any more between them, neither will they question one another. (trans. A.J. Arberry)²³

Such a radical individualism might not have been accepted among the early audience of the Qurʾān if they had not already been familiar with an individual approach towards the issue of human mortality and immortality. The poetical sources provide some evidence to support this assumption.

The notion of immortality in the context of early Arabic panegyrics refers much more to this world than to the next and says more about the poets' life on earth than their speculations about the hereafter. Nonetheless, in texts with strong liturgical connotations references to the finiteness of human life are also often expressed in a homiletic context with clear moralistic implications. Moses himself, as attested to in the biblical psalms, offers no other perspective of the hereafter but a returning to dust and is more concerned about giving guidance in earthly life than about anything that follows after it:

Ps 90:1.3.12

אֲדַנִּי מֵעוֹן אֲתָהּ הָיִיתָ לָנוּ בְּדֹר וָדֹר:
רְשׁוּבוֹ בְּיָמֵינוּ אָמַרְתָּ: תָּשֻׁב אֶנּוֹשׁ עַד־דָּפָא וְתֵאמָר
לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כִּן הוֹדַע וְנִבְּא לִבְבִּי חֻכְמָה:

1. Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
 3. You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men."
 12. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
- (New International Version)

The finiteness of human life is a phenomenon of frontier crossing. In dealing with it, several Late Antique religious sources do not just offer utopian visions of the future, but take account of the significance that confronting death has for the present life. In this context the profane character of early Arabic poetry should not be misinterpreted. This poetry had a normative meaning and in many aspects fulfilled the function that in other cultural milieus belonged to the domain of religious literature. As James Montgomery notes in the manifesto concluding his study of the early Arabic *qaṣīda*, "an Arabic poetry for Arabs, like an Arabic Qurʾān for Muslims, in the religious domain, was an expression of poetic, cultural and

²³ Arberry A.J., *The Koran Interpreted*. Vol. 2. London 1955, 44.

political autonomy and pride”.²⁴ It remains our task to approach early Arabic poetry in a way that will make it more accessible as a source for the study of the religious history of the Arabs.

Appendix

As-Samaw'al, *Poem VI*, in: *Dīwān as-Samaw'al*, ed. by Wādih aṣ-Ṣamad. Beirut 1996, 96-101:

1. عَفَا مِنْ آلِ فَاطِمَةَ الْخُبَيْثُ إِلَى الْإِحْرَامِ لَيْسَ بِهِنَّ بَيْتُ
2. أَعَادِلَتِي قَوْلُكُمَا عَصَيْتُ لِنَفْسِي إِنْ رَشِدْتُ وَإِنْ عَوَيْتُ
3. بَنَى لِي عَادِيًا حِصْنًا حَصِينًا وَعَيْنًا كُلَّمَا شِئْتُ اسْتَقَيْتُ
4. طِمْرًا تَزْلُقُ الْعُقْبَانُ عَنْهُ إِذَا مَا ضَامَنِي شَيْءٌ أَبَيْتُ
5. وَأَوْصَى عَادِيًا جَدِّي بِأَنْ لَا تُضَيِّعَ يَا سَمَوَالُ مَا بَنَيْتُ
6. وَبَيْتٌ قَدْ بَنَيْتُ بِغَيْرِ طِينٍ وَلَا خَشَبٍ وَمَجْدٌ قَدْ أَتَيْتُ
7. وَجَيْشٌ فِي دُجَى الظُّلُمَاءِ مَجْرٍ يَوْمُ بِلَادٍ مَلِكٍ قَدْ هَدَيْتُ
8. وَذَنْبٌ قَدْ عَفَوْتُ لِغَيْرِ بَاعٍ وَلَا وَاعٍ وَعَنْهُ قَدْ عَفَوْتُ
9. فَإِنْ أَهْلَكَ فَقَدْ أَبْلَيْتُ عُذْرًا وَقَضَيْتُ اللَّبَانَةَ وَاسْتَقَيْتُ
10. وَأَصْرَفُ عَنْ قَوَارِصَ تَجْتَدِينِي وَلَوْ أَنِّي أَشَاءُ بِهَا جَزَيْتُ
11. فَأَحْمِي الْجَارَ فِي الْجَلَى فَيُمْسِي عَزِيزًا لَا يُرَامُ إِذَا حَمَيْتُ
12. وَفَيْتُ بِأَدْرَعِ الْكِنْدِيِّ إِنِّي إِذَا مَا دُمْتُ أَقْوَامٌ وَفَيْتُ
13. وَقَالُوا إِنَّهُ كَنْزٌ رَغِيبٌ فَلَا وَاللَّهِ أَغْدِرُ مَا مَشَيْتُ
14. وَلَوْلَا أَنْ يُقَالَ صَبَا عُنَيْسُ إِلَى بَعْضِ الْيُبُوتِ لَقَدْ صَبَوْتُ
15. وَقُبَّةٍ حَاصِنٍ أَدْخَلْتُ رَأْسِي وَمِعْصَمَهَا الْمُوشَمَ قَدْ لَوَيْتُ
16. وَدَاهِيَةٍ يَظَلُّ النَّاسُ مِنْهَا فَيَأْمًا بِالْمَحَارِفِ قَدْ كَفَيْتُ

²⁴ Montgomery J., *The Vagaries of the Qaṣīdah. The Tradition and Practice of Early Arabic Poetry*. Cambridge 1997, 259.

1. Al-Ḥubayt is effaced [*abandoned*] by the tribe of Fāṭima
up to al-Iḥrām there is no tent.
2. Oh you two railing women! I disobey your words!
It is up to me whether I do right or wrong.
3. ʿĀdiyā has built me an unassailable fortress
and a source: every time I want – I draw (water out of it).
4. A high-rising, from which eagles go down.
When something harms me, I do not yield.
5. ʿĀdiyā, my grandfather commanded: May you not
destroy, oh Samaw'al, what I have built!
6. A good many houses have I built without clay
and without wood, and a good many honours [*glory*] have I won.
7. A good many forces, which in the darkness of the night, heavily equipped
hold the course towards the land of the king, have I led.
8. A good many faults have I forgiven someone worthless
and thoughtless, and I have spared him.
9. So if I perish, yet I have given a proof of forgiveness,
fulfilled the purpose and have been cured.
10. I move away from harsh (words) provoking me
and if I wish, I could requite them.
11. If I protect the neighbor in a serious situation, he becomes
strong, he is not abandoned when I protect him.
12. I fulfilled the promise with the armour of the Kindī. I am,
when other people are blamed, faithful.
13. They said: it is an immense treasure!,
but, by God, I will not betray as long as I live [lit. *walk*].
14. And were it not that they would have said: a decrepit man is passionate
about (visiting a women in) a tent, I would have been passionate.
15. And a good many tents of a chaste (women) have I put my head in
and have banded her tattooed wrist.
16. And a good many calamities, from which people search protection
escaping, have I saved from with dexterity.